

## Letter To Barbra's Cheesepuffs

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Dear Barbra's Cheesepuffs,

I never really liked you before now. Your puffs seemed like a flavorless, cardboard, downgraded version of Cheetos. I would eat you every once and a while out of reluctance and necessity. All I envisioned when I looked into your skinny bag was pure mediocrity. I suppose you were trying to be a healthier version of Cheetos, and you reached the exact passing point. With your light yellow color, mindless munch-ability, and array of strange cheeses, you were enough to be a sufficient snack but not enough to fill me with delight.

After COVID-19 emerged, however, everything changed.

On the Thursday before spring break, things in Austin started to fall apart completely. School was officially closed the next day, until indefinitely. Although some people grasped a couple more days of freedom, my family immediately started our social distancing that night for the safety of my sister, who has a disability- the dreaded and ableist "underlying condition". We were faced with an endless slew of days at home, surviving with only each other while watching our city and the world fall apart. Each day bringing higher numbers of those infected, new frustrations of government incompetence, and more stories of individual struggle and loss. Each person found solace and comfort in something: for our family, it was your golden bag of cheesy snacks.

I don't remember when you first made your way into our house. Sometime at the beginning of our quarantine, you wandered into our hands from the shelves of Fresh Plus. Your puffs that had previously seemed flavorless and lacking suddenly were a crunchy delight that made us forget our troubles. The mindless consumption was comforting; just enough flavor, just enough texture, just enough salt to keep us going. Your bags would disappear within a day- sometimes with multiple people tackling the bag, or perhaps a desperate solo snacker.

Eventually, our Cheesepuff snacking became routine. There was a certain time between lunch and dinner where everything seemed bleak, when we were tired and it seemed like there was nothing left to do. That's when your orange and blue bag would come out. Usually around 4 o'clock, but perhaps earlier if the day was especially disheartening. It became like our tea time, but instead of Earl Grey and crumpets, we plowed through bags of cheese puffs. It even earned itself a name: "Cheesepuff O'Clock". When the time came someone would cock their head and ask, inquisitively, "Cheesepuff O'Clock?". Heads were nodded in agreement and we would rush to the pantry, shoving our hands into your bag, trying to get our share of the golden snack. As we neared the bottom of your bag we faced an empty void staring back up at us. The contents of

your bag were reduced to mere crumbs that were tipped into someone's mouth, and then the moment was over. The bag was empty, and we moved on until tomorrow.

Although we were ruthless with our cheese puff consumption, we did try to be fair. My brother snuck out one night and my parents forced him to quarantine in his room because he had exposed us, but we still brought him bites of puffs. My mom and I would plow through  $\frac{3}{4}$ ths of your bag and then bring the dregs up to my brother, leaving you outside his door like we were feeding a ravenous beast. He was quarantined in his room for two weeks, and during that time we were free to have your puffs to ourselves, controlling you completely. We did not have any worries that a hungry teenage boy would empty our supply with no abandon, and we lived gratefully but obliviously with that privilege.

Once he got out, however, everything changed. We had become so protective of our cheese puffs, so dependent on our Cheesepuff O'Clock, so desperate. A couple of days after he rejoined the family he grabbed your bag around 2 pm. We had just eaten lunch. It was a *disgrace*. He was violating the Cheesepuff code. When I saw him on the couch, licking his fingers, my eyes filled with fear. I was screaming on the inside: "HE CAN'T *DO THAT*". He had only eaten about ten, but in my eyes he was tearing through the bag with reckless abandon. I recruited my mother to stop him and the wrath was unleashed. We tore your bag out of his hands, with desperation in our eyes, blinded by our cult-like reliance on your cheezy sticks.

It was clear that you had become much more than a snack to us. You were our way out of isolation, our escape from quarantine. After our squabble, my dad made sure to keep the pantry stocked with your puffs in order to prevent another episode of violent desperation. I'm sure our shelf is more fully stocked than the one at Fresh Plus at this point. Any less than three bags of your puffs on our shelves is a dishonor to our sanity. We have both your Classic flavor and Jalepeño flavor. While we dig into your bag, we briefly rely on the consumerist philosophy to depend on *things* to get us through this pandemic.

But why was it *you* Barbra's Cheesepuffs? Why did the once bland, disappointing snack become such an important part of this life? Why not Cheez Its, Pringles, or even Cheetos? Was it your timing? Your availability? Or do you have some secret ingredient: the same as the alcohol that takes the sting off the day for so many people, the same as the TV drama that so many people watch to escape from their own reality, the same as the slot machines that so many people pour their money into expecting a reward? I don't know, and I don't know if I will ever find out.

One day my mom and I were locked into my room because we were having a problem with our bathtub and toilet which were leaking into the floor below and decomposing the ceiling. Although the risk of having Maintenance workers in our house was dangerous, we needed to do something about the problem. After having to deal with the corporate office of our apartment complex we got some workers to come in and try to prevent our ceiling from falling apart. We spent about 3  $\frac{1}{2}$  hours locked in my room for our safety, and we were getting stir-crazy. Eventually, my dad brought us a bag of your Jalepeño cheese puffs, and we commenced to again eat our troubles away, trying to forget about the exposure from the Maintenance workers and the

tight space we were in. After the bag was empty, however, I started to feel sickly. The stale stench of Jalepeño was still on my hands, the dry taste of your cheese still in my mouth. I couldn't leave the room to wash away the residue of indulgence. I was betrayed by you, you who was once a savior was now a curse. Eventually, we were allowed to leave and I could clear cheese puff from my conscience. I am sure I will eat you again, and I will depend on you again, but I might never be the same.

Somehow it's you, Barbra's Cheesepuffs, that has carried our family through this pandemic. I know it's artificial. It's not *really* because of cheese puffs that we are still here. But somehow, you have made this a little bit better. When we look at the news and see stories of the homeless and imprisoned suffering systematic insufficiency and instability it makes us feel better to munch on your cheezy sticks. When we hear about healthcare workers pushing themselves to the limits and isolating themselves from their families, and watch our own friends go through the same struggle, it helps to grab your orange bag. When we face the millions of people who have lost their jobs or risk exposure because they are forced to continue to work, it relieves us to shove a handful of your chips into our mouths. When tensions grow tight in our family it helps to crunch on your pale surface, crunch so loud that the fighting has been drowned out. In our world, currently riddled with instability, uncertainty, loneliness, and despair, sometimes the only thing you can trust is cheese puffs.

In time, once this is all over, we will try to forget about you. We will see a bag of your puffs and laugh it off- "Remember how much we ate? Remember how desperate we got?". We will try to move on, to forget about the pain and uncertainty. As a world, collectively, we will be forced to forget. Companies, the government, and everybody will be so focused on returning to normalcy we will want to forget this time, forget about all the cheese puffs we ate. We will want to move on, forget about our losses, reject the great pause that swept over the entire world, and just start going again, fast-forwarding to a time where we feel comfortable. But this will be an important time to remember. Because when we look closely, we will find your yellow crumbs in the cracks of our couch, your stray white dust wiped on an old pair of jeans, and cheesy fingerprints of the past lingering on the walls. I just want to say thank you, Barbra's Cheese Puffs, for supporting us through this time. And even when the taste of stale cheese has been long gone from my lips, I will try and remember how you held us together when everything else was falling apart.

Sincerely,

A Quarantined Snacker